

The IRON TRAIL

BY
REX BEACH

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(Continued.)
"Everybody out! The ship is sinking!" As he turned away Murray seized him roughly by the arm and, thrusting his face close to the other's, said harshly:

"If you yell again like that I'll toss you overboard."
"God help us, we're going!"
O'Neill shook the fellow until his teeth rattled; his own countenance, ordinarily so quiet, was blazing.

"There's no danger. Act like a man and don't start a stampede."

The steward pulled himself together and answered in a calmer tone:

"Very well, sir. I—I'm sorry, sir."

Murray O'Neill was known to most of the passengers, for his name had gone up and down the coast, and there were few places from San Francisco to Nome where his word did not carry weight.

As he went among his fellow travelers now, smiling, well contained, unruffled, his presence had its effect.

Women ceased their shrilling, men stopped their senseless questions and listened to his directions with some comprehension. In a short time the passengers were marshaled upon the upper deck where the lifeboats hung between the davits.

Each little craft was in charge of its allotted crew, the electric lights continued to burn brightly, and the panic gradually wore itself out.

Meanwhile the ship was running a desperate race with the sea, striving with every ounce of steam in her boilers to find a safe berth for her mutilated body before the crush of waters drowned her.

There was little confusion, little talking, upon the upper deck now. Only a child whimpered or a woman sobbed hysterically. But down forward among the steerage passengers the case was

talk of horses while we've got women and children aboard." He hastened away to assist in transferring his passengers.

Instead of following, O'Neill turned and went below. His appearance, the sound of his voice, were the signals for a chorus of eager whinnies and a great stamping of hoofs.

Heads were thrust toward him from the stalls, alert ears were pricked forward, satin muzzles rubbed against him as he calmed their terror. This blind trust made the man's throat tighten aching.

He loved animals as he loved children, and above all he cared for horses.

He cursed aloud and made his way down the sloping deck to the square iron door or port through which he had loaded them.

But he found that the pressure outside, and after a few moments' work in water above his knees he climbed to the starboard side.

Here the entrance was obstructed by a huge pile of baled hay and grain in sacks. It would be no easy task to clear it away, and he fell to work with desperate energy, for the ship was slowly changing her level.

He was perspiring furiously; the commotion around him was horrible. Then abruptly the lights went out, leaving him in utter blackness; the last fading yellow gleam was photographed briefly upon his retina.

O'Neill felt for the little bracket lamp on the wall of his stateroom and lit it. He dragged a life preserver from the rack overhead and slipped the tapes about his shoulders, reflecting that Alaskan waters are disagreeably cold.

Then he opened his traveling bags and dumped their contents upon the white counterpane of his berth, selecting out of the confusion certain documents and trinkets.

The latter he thrust into his pockets as he found them, the former he wrapped in handkerchiefs before stowing them away.

All at once he whirled and faced the door with an exclamation of astonishment, for a voice had addressed him.

There, clinging to the casing, stood a woman—a girl—evidently drawn out of the darkness by the light which streamed down across the sloping deck from his stateroom.

Plainly she had but just awakened, for she was clothed in a silken nightgown which failed to conceal the outlines of her body. She had flung a quilted dressing gown of some sort over her shoulders and with one bare arm and hand strove to hold it in place.

He saw that her pink feet were thrust into soft, heelless slippers, that her hair, black in this light, cascaded down to her waist, and that her eyes, which were very dark and very large, were fixed upon him with a stare like that of a sleepwalker.

"It is so dark—so strange—so still," she murmured. "What has happened?"

"God! Didn't they awaken you?" he cried in sharp surprise.

"Is the ship—sinking?" Her odd bewilderment of voice and gaze puzzled him.

He nodded. "We struck a rock. The passengers have been taken off. We're the only ones left. In heaven's name, where have you been?"

He shook his head in astonishment. "How you failed to hear that hubbub!"

"I heard something, but I was ill. My head—I took something to ease the pain."

"Ah! Medicine! It hasn't worn off yet, I see. You shouldn't have taken it. Drugs are nothing but poison to young people. Now, at my age there might be some excuse for resorting to them, but you?"

He was talking to her, for his own predicament had been serious enough, and her presence rendered it doubly embarrassing. Yet in the world to do with her he scarcely knew.

His lips were smiling, but his eyes were grave as they roved over the cabin and out into the blackness of the night.

"Are we going to drown?" she asked dully.

"Nonsense!" He laughed in apparent amusement, showing his large, strong teeth.

"I'm wretchedly afraid," she whispered through white lips.

"None of that!" he said brusquely. "I'll see that nothing happens to you."

He slipped out of his life preserver and adjusted it over her shoulders, first drawing her arms through the sleeves of her dressing gown and knotting the cord snugly around her waist.

"Just as a matter of precaution," he assured her. "We may get wet. Can you swim?"

"Never mind; I can." He found another life belt, fitted it to his own form and let her out upon the deck. The scuppers were awash now, and she gasped as the sea licked her bare feet.

Slipping his arm about her, he bore her to the door of the main cabin and entered. She had clasped his neck so tightly that he could scarcely breathe; but, lowering her until her feet were on the dry carpet, he gently loosened her arms.

"Now, my dear child," he told her, "you must do exactly as I tell you. Come! Calm yourself or I won't take you any farther." He held her off by his shoulders. "I may have to swim with you; you mustn't cling to me!"

O'Neill judged that the ship was at

least a quarter of a mile from the beach, and his heart sank, for he doubted that either he or his companion could last long in these waters. It occurred to him that Brennan might be close by, waiting for the Nebraska to sink—it would be unlike the little captain to forsake his trust until the last possible moment—but he reasoned that the cargo of lives in the skipper's boat would induce him to stand well off to avoid accident. He called lustily time after time, but no answer came.

Meanwhile the girl stood quietly beside him.

There followed a wait which seemed long, but was in reality of but a few minutes, for the ship was sliding backward and the sea was creeping up.



"Take the girl—quick," he implored.

ward faster and faster. At last they heard a shuddering sigh as she parted from the rocks and the air rushed up through the deck openings with greater force.

The Nebraska swung sickly with the tide; then, when her upper structure had settled flush with the sea, Murray O'Neill took the woman in his arms and leaped clear of the rail.

The first gasping moment of immersion was fairly paralyzing; after that the reaction came, and the two began to struggle away from the sinking ship.

But the effect of the reaction soon wore off. The water was cruelly cold and their bodies ached in every nerve and fiber.

O'Neill did his best to encourage his companion. He talked to her through his chattering teeth, and once she had recovered from the mental shock of the first fearful plunge she responded pluckily.

He knew that his own heart was normal and strong, but he feared that the girl's might not be equal to the strain.

At length there came through the man's dazed sensibilities a sound different from those he had been hearing. It was a human voice, mingled with the measured thud of oars in their sockets.

It roused him like an electric current and gave him strength to cry out hoarsely. Some one answered him. Then out of the darkness to seaward emerged a deeper blot, which loomed up hugely, yet proved to be no more than a lifeboat banked full of people.

It came to a stop within an oar's length of him. From the babble of voices he distinguished one that was familiar and cried the name of Johnny Brennan.

His brain had cleared now, a great dreamlike sense of thanksgiving warmed him, and he felt equal to any effort. He was vaguely amazed to find that his limbs refused to obey him.

His own name was being pronounced in shocked tones. The splash from an oar filled his face and strangled him, but he managed to lay hold of the blade and was drawn in until outstretched hands seized him.

An oarsman was saying: "Be careful there! We can't take him in without swamping."

But Brennan's voice shouted, "Make room or I'll bash in your bloody skull!"

Another protest arose, and O'Neill saw that the craft was indeed loaded to the gunwales.

"Take the girl—quick!" he implored. "I'll hang on. You can—tow me."

The leap from the Nebraska to the lifeboat was a feat of agility and strength. Brennan saw him side and dragged over the thwart while a murmur of excited voices went up.

"Can you hold out for a minute, Murray?" asked Brennan.

"Yes—I think so."

"I'd give you my place, but you're too big to be taken in without danger."

"Go ahead," chattered the man in the water. "Look after the girl before it's too late."

The captain's stout hand was in his collar now, and he heard him crying: "Pull, you muscle bound heathens! Everybody sit still! Now away with her, men. Keep up your heart, Murray, my boy. Remember it takes more than water to kill a good Irishman."

It's only a foot or two farther, and they've started a fire. Serves you right, you big idiot, for going overboard with all those boats. Man dear, but you're pulling the arm out of me. It's stretched out like a garden hose. Hey! Cover up that girl, and you, lady, rub her feet and hands. Good! Move over please so the men can bail."

The next O'Neill knew he was feeling very miserable and very cold notwithstanding the fact that he was wrapped in dry clothing and lay so close to a roaring spruce fire that its heat blistered him.

Brennan was bending over him with eyes wet. He was swearing, too, in a weak, faltering way, calling upon all the saints to witness that the present man was the embodiment of every virtue and that his death would be a national calamity.

Others were gathered about, men and women, and among them O'Neill saw the doctor from Sitka whom he had met on shipboard.

(To Be Continued.)

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(To Be Continued.)

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Those who neglect to present their accounts, properly attested, within said time, will be deemed a recovery. All persons indebted to said Estate are requested to make immediate payment to

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Those who neglect to present their accounts, properly attested, within said time, will be deemed a recovery. All persons indebted to said Estate are requested to make immediate payment to

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STATE OF CONNECTICUT. DISTRICT OF BRIDGEPORT, ss., PROBATE COURT.

March 31, 1916. Estate of Preucille McPadden, late of the town of Bridgeport, in said district, deceased.

The Court of Probate for the District of Bridgeport, hath limited and allowed six months from the date hereof for Creditors of said Estate to exhibit their claims for settlement.

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